

WHO DEBRIEFS THE REST OF US?

By Edward P. Eismann, Ph.D., Clinical Director, Unitas Therapeutic Community

The author, an experienced clinician, reflects on his experiences providing informal "debriefing" to people in his community, including students, colleagues, and strangers; people who hadn't sought formal assistance, but who were nonetheless affected by the tragedies and needed to reach out.

September 11, 2001. It is now 10 am. as I sit dazed before the TV. It is 1 pm. I sit dazed before the TV. It is 4 pm. I and the TV are one. It is 6, 9, 11 pm. It is the next day, and the same pattern continues. And the following day. I finally go to work dazed, robotized, and continuing the TV ritual when I come home. In the restlessness of the night, I have this dream: I am going out to my car and see the side ripped off. I stand and look at the damaged car with shock and think, "What happened to my car? Who did this? Why did this happen?" I did not want to leave it on the city street like this, lest it be gutted further. I move to repair it by putting a thin plywood board to cover the empty space and attach the board with duct tape. Even in the dream, I know this is ineffective, unsafe, and ridiculous, and know that anyone could rip the repair off, get complete access to the car, vandalize it further, or just drive away with it. Logically, I think that the better way to repair it would be to get a power drill and bolt metal to the frame of the open space. But where would I get these resources and what do I know about bolting metal frames to sides of cars? I am lucky to know just how to hammer a nail. So I leave the car with its taped plywood and walk off unresolved, panicked, even in denial about the car itself and my ineffective temporary solution. I then wake up.

I know the dream's meaning; it reflects my feeling of powerlessness, paralysis, and even unwillingness to seek out effective ways

to repair the damage. My adrenaline in the face of shock energizes me to take flight, not fight, to escape the unbearable sense of powerlessness. My feelings overwhelm me while my mind keeps saying, "Don't run away, don't just sit there; go help out; go to the Red Cross; go to other relief organizations and do grief work; go downtown and help out doing debriefing work. After all you are an experienced clinician with 40 years experience; how dare you stay at home and do nothing; how selfish; how irresponsible; even how morally wrong!" Now I am heaping guilt upon the foundation of powerlessness and paralysis. I am the car and the ripped side reflects my psychic trauma at the horrific event of our time. I am dramatically aware of the thousands upon thousands of metaphoric ruptured cars in unison with mine and the repairs of the terrible damages that will be needed now and over time. But I sit, dazed, and feel a disembodied self in the midst of this nightmare. I am mending neither myself nor my neighbor, but putting duct tape and flimsy plywood on the wound to convince myself that it is really not as bad as my feelings tell me.

I go back to work. It is the south Bronx, New York City, a bustling community in metamorphosis rising from its own ashes, attempting to revitalize itself. The community has a tradition of failing schools and peoples struggling to keep hope alive amidst terrible social and economic odds. I know this. I am a community mental health clinician in the noble tradition of social work for 35 years. I have

walked these streets and held children's hands as they have grown up. I am walking to a school on Southern Boulevard and I smell polluted air blowing north from lower Manhattan. Reminders of the nightmare are not restricted to TV. They are all around. We cannot get away from the sights, smells, sounds, and images of the nightmare in reality or by 24-hours-a-day coverage on TV. And everyone has a story, not just the people downtown. That's what this story here is about.

I walk into the seventh grade class and get a lot of "Hi, Doc" from boys and girls whom I have known since toddlerhood. Looking at them is a familiar scene. I also stood here when their parents sat in the same seats and, for some, even their grandparents. It seems as though I have been here forever; 35 years in one place is forever for a clinician. We usually change jobs a lot over time. In my time frame here, I have this advantage: I am an emblem of trust and long-standing friendship. With this connection, it is difficult to hold back the feelings in the stories each one wants to tell as we now sit together in "tribal council." To sit with the trusted and protective elder in times of distress is an ancient tradition.

"A terrible and frightening thing has happened to us in our city. What did you hear or see?" Without hesitation, children speak up: "I know a man who was there and still thinks it's a dream; he's still waiting to wake up" says one child. Another, bursting at the seams, says, "My uncle works in a bank in that area and he saw the plane hit and the collapse of the building too. A friend of my family also saw everything, and burst into tears because she has a friend who works there and she thinks he died. My brother was looking at all this with his telescope on the roof and told us what he saw." I comment: "So, you know a lot of people who were witnesses to this and told you first hand what they saw and how frightened they were. And how did you feel

about all this?"

"I felt sad for all those people and frightened too, frightened that it might happen here." Ah, here it is, this is what I was waiting for, the personal expressions of fear, the anxiety about survival. I say to the group: "What do you think about what Jose just said? He is frightened about this happening here, to him." Bad timing! They are not ready for personal "I" statements. A girl quickly responds with more "fact telling" stories: "My mother works downtown and saw the first explosion; she called my father to tell him what happened and my father sat down to look at TV. Then she looked out her window at work and saw the second plane hit. People started screaming and running when the second plane hit. She saw people jumping out of windows and [she hesitates] she said they looked like cartoon people." I say, "Your mother hesitated to put it that way because she knew it was not funny, but it seemed so unreal to her she couldn't believe it. Your mom speaks truly what it seemed like. So many people would put it that way, like an unbelievable nightmare."

By now, hands are going up all over the room. Stories are flooding in. "My friend's mom works in the parking station near the WTC and she saw both crashes. She left her job and went down to pick up her younger children. She got to her car and because she had her badge on, they let her go by. She was so shaken up she said she could not think of going back to work." I comment: "She was a real witness to what happened and she is so frightened about this now; she is in a panic. Does she have some people to talk to about this, to listen to her?" The child says, "Yes, her husband and my mother who is her friend. Actually, her husband worked nearby there and went up to the roof and saw everything. He was scared, too; he didn't know what to do." I say: "They probably will stay scared for a while, like millions of other people who saw this; this is a memory that will stay with them for a long time. That is normal. It is good

they have each other and your mother to talk together, like we are doing here. In fact all of you here are sharing some wonderfully important stories. And I see so many hands up. You are to be congratulated for this.”

Linda comments, “My aunt that morning was going to that building for a meeting with others from her school and she got lost and went the wrong way. The others, there were about 100, were in the building. She knew about ten of them personally.” I comment: “She must be going through a terrible time, even while feeling relieved that she is alive. You know this from her as she is talking about her experience. I am glad your family is there for her. She will need to talk a lot about this, just as Linda’s neighbor will need to do with her family and friends, and again, as we are doing right now.”

“My best friend’s partner had been laid off from work the day before. She worked on the 107th floor. She said it was God telling her not to work because this was going to happen.” I comment: “So she feels she had a special grace that directed her before this happened. That is similar to what Linda was saying about her aunt who was delayed from being there when it happened. There are similar stories here as well as special individual stories. How courageous you are in talking of your experiences and frights here with each other. Go on.”

Paul speaks up: “A close friend I’ve known since a little boy worked on the 107th floor too. When he saw smoke he called my uncle who was his best friend to tell him what was happening. He called his wife to tell her he loved her. We haven’t heard from him since.” I comment: “And you’re still waiting and you have to sit with this terrible fear about him. How do you, your family, sit with this fright?” Child says: “We pray and hope he will show up, that’s what we do, that is all we can do.” I add: “So a wonderful thing you do is to pray and stick close together as a family, just being together is comforting and makes

everyone feel stronger.”

There is energy, connectedness, and comfort visibly settling in on my young friends in this tribal dialogue as I listen, clarify, reframe all statements with an empathic response, and hold each statement expressed as a golden nugget. They then begin to become resources of support to each other to counter their collective anxiety.

I finish up the discussion and hang out loosely. I note the anxiety of teachers and staff. We talk one by one and then in groups, informally, at lunch, at breaks, during class time. I find out that teachers are given directives to listen to the children, hold talk time with classes about the children’s frights and panic. They, too, are immobilized. What did they do? The real concern the teachers have is that no one is listening to them and their panic. They are being given instructions about the experience to give to the children, but no one is attending their similar anxieties and fears about this event that has traumatized all, not just children. I listen, I invite others to join us in ventilating the emotions of the moment and the fears of things to come. I invite perspectives, reassurance, and logic into the talks. They have each other; they can do what we are doing now as much as needed. Do they feel safe at this moment? We are in this together; God is, we hope, above and we are his children; good people are thinking collectively about keeping us safe. What would help each one right now to feel better? Who needs what? Who needs to check in a lot with others? Who needs particular comfort here which others need to be aware of? And so it goes. All informal. I mingle throughout the day in hallway, lunchroom, gymnasium. I poke my head in classrooms and say, “Are you ok?” as I would to victims in an accident.

I start the trip back to my office five blocks away. I meet Augustine, an artist in the community, who is dressed up with coat and tie. I never saw such attire on him. He tells me about being downtown and seeing

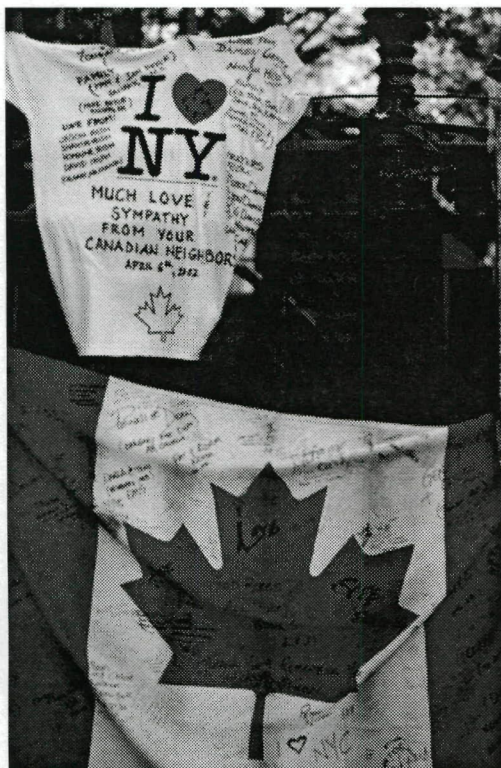
the tragedy firsthand. He says he is dressed up in this formal way because it helps him keep control over his feelings, makes him feel together and whole in the only way he knows right now. He tells of his experience. I encourage him in this. He tells of meeting a woman he knew whom he ran into on 50th Street, and how good it was to see a familiar face. Stopped and had coffee with her and talked. "How good it was you met her. Tell me what you talked about," I say. He recounts them both ventilating their panic, sharing, and listening. I comment, "Do you have others here now that you can continue to do this with?" He talks of friends and family. "And how are they? Do you all talk about this together?" "I am beginning to do that," he says. "Talk to them and hear them out," I say, "the way you and your friend did on 50th Street. And share food together as you do this. Remember how relieving this was to you with her?" He thinks about this and smiles. "Thanks," he says, and seems to find comfort in this suggestion. I then bump into Nino

from a children's agency nearby that was going to have a community festival in October. He was concerned because some people felt it was inappropriate to have the festival in the wake of the tragedy. I comment that it could also be seen as a community coming together to strengthen their relationships with each other, and in memory of those they may have lost. He smiles and sees this as a theme for the festival and has renewed hope to keep the festival alive

I detour from my usual path to reflect in silence. The silence speaks its wis-

dom to me and offers me the bolts and metal I seek. In this inner soliloquy it occurs to me that the experiences of the day have given me an insight. It is this: everyone around me has some degree of a ripped car side, some more, some less. All have been impacted by this event, and as I am able and willing to encounter each one I meet in the natural order of the day and say, "How are you doing in the middle of this horror?" I am participating truly in the work of repair, my own and that of the people around me. The flood gates open each time, and the "debriefing" I do not do officially and formally downtown, I do naturally with my neighbors, my students, my colleagues, parishioners, even strangers. I listen without interruption, tracking and empathizing with the fears and plights of all. I ask if they have anyone to keep talking to, and if they do not, I help them internally locate someone to keep talking to, man, or God. I ask them what they will do today to feel safe, to find hope and a reason to get respite in order to go on tomorrow. It is what I would do downtown formally. But this is informal, natural, and perhaps, in that sense, an intervention that reaches the common folk who fall through the cracks. I hope that in some way my availability helps repair the damaged doors of all I meet, no less my own.

And my damaged door does begin to be mended with bolts and metal as I find a way to help others informally to repair theirs. I did not consciously find a way to repair my door, but it found me in all those I met naturally around me who ached as much as those who sought out repair from the formal system. Both go hand in hand, but for the common folk, we are right in front of each other. I saw him and her on the very paths where I naturally walked. They were just the people I met on my street, in my workplace, in my place of worship. They were my neighbors. And I remembered, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." An ancient instruction, but perhaps the one that really saves us all.



Friends from Canada show their support at the Ground Zero Memorial

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